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The Minister and The Community

WOODROW WILSON



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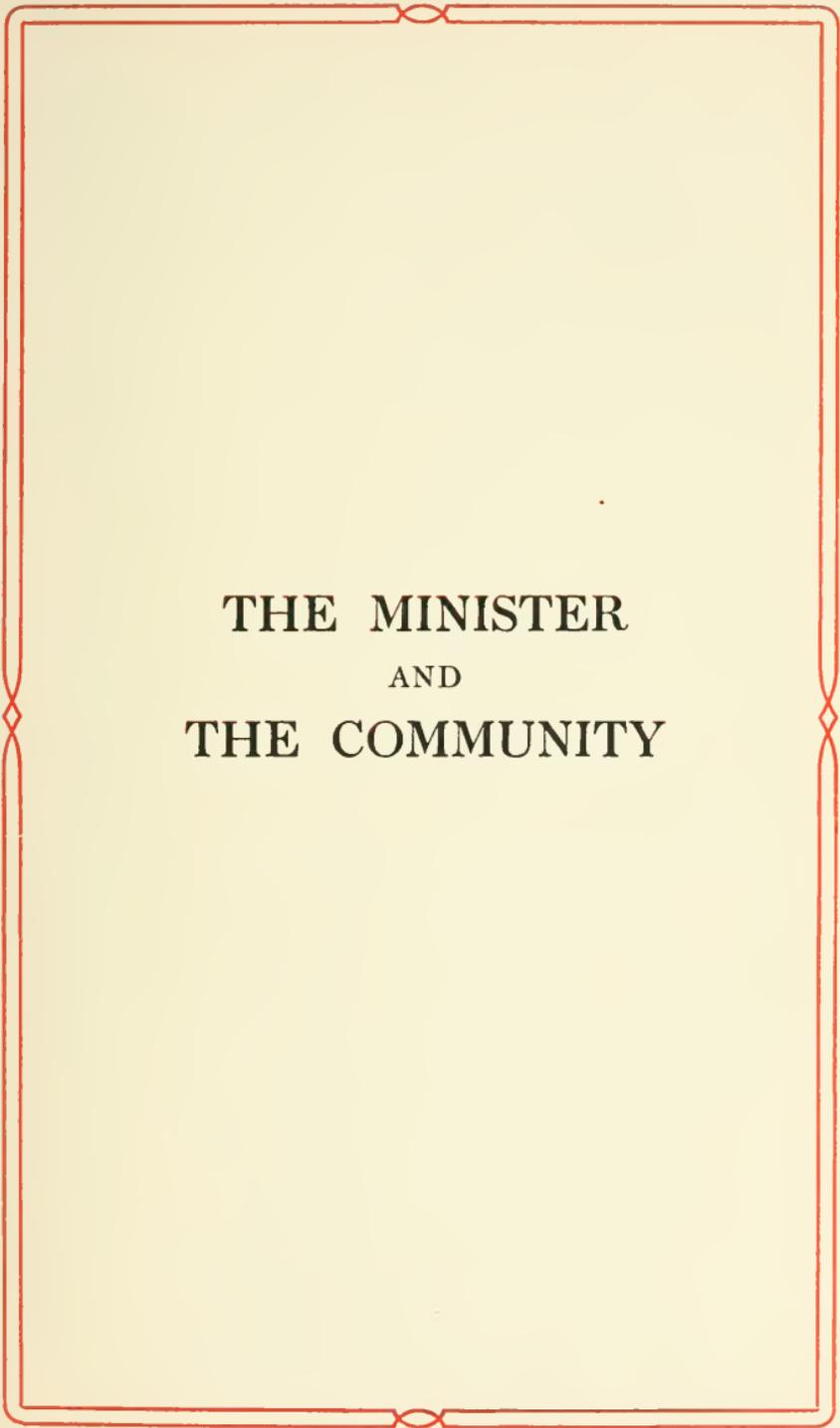
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THE MINISTER
AND
THE COMMUNITY



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THE COMMUNITY

Woodrow Wilson

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The Minister and The Community

THERE are two ideals between which the Church, first and last, has oscillated in respect to the position that a minister ought to hold in the community. The one is the ideal which expects the minister to hold himself aloof from the ordinary transactions of life, and to devote himself exclusively, and I was about to say almost ostentatiously, to the things which are spiritual. This is the ideal which has led to asceticism, to practices of the Church which have absolutely shut

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the priesthood off from the life of the community, which have forced upon them an unnatural way of living and an unnatural separation from the ordinary interests of the world.

Then there is the opposite idea—that the minister ought to be part of everything in a community that makes for its betterment, its improvement, its amelioration, its reformation—that he should take a deep interest in everything that affects the life of the community and be at particular pains to live as other men live, and not in any way show himself separate from the world, not in any way, that, at any

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rate externally, changes the current and method of his life. Certain men in our own generation have taken the position that, though they wish to preach the Gospel and influence men to come to Christ, they will have a greater influence if they do not accept the ordination of the Church, but remain laymen. It is their impression that a layman can preach straighter to the hearts of laymen than ministers can. There is something of the idea creeping in in various quarters, that the lay instrumentalities find the straightest roads to the hearts of men, and that the ministerial instrumentality is tainted a little by the profession-

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alism which is in it; that the advice of the professional spiritual adviser is less cogent than the advice of the amateur spiritual adviser. This is the extreme form of this view.

Let us acknowledge at the outset that in our time we have been trying to unfrock the ministerial profession, literally and metaphorically. We are afraid of the frock, we are afraid of the sign, we are afraid of the touch of professionalism. It is a characteristic of our time that we wish to combine all things without differentiation in one single thing that we call life, and the consequence is that we do

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not know what we would be at. The consequence is that no man sees distinctly enough the particular road that he is trying to tread, the particular function which he is trying to perform in society. He says, "I must be a man," by which he means an added general force in society and not a specialized force in society; by which he means that he must disperse his powers and not concentrate them. And yet the difficulty of modern times is this very dispersion of professional energy, this obliteration of the lines that run and should run between one calling and another. The soldier is proud of his uniform and of

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the straps over his arms and shoulders, the mark of his rank; and every man who counts for as much of direct force as the soldier counts for ought to be proud of the things that distinguish his calling. I trust that no man will go into the ministry with the hope that he can conceal himself in the crowd, so that no man may know that he is a minister. I hope that he may plan his life so that nobody may ever associate with him without knowing that he is a minister.

How are we going to do this? By resuming the costume, by resuming the ritual, by resuming the aloofness and separateness from the

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world? That would be better than nothing. It is true, whether we like the fact or not, that the Roman Catholic priesthood, when its members have really remembered their consecration and lived true to it, have made a deeper impression upon the communities they lived in than the Protestant clergy, because they were men whom to look upon was to recall the fact that they were commissioned out of the unseen, that they did not live as other men lived, that they did devote themselves to something separate and apart; that it was intended that when they came into a company of men, those men

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should be reminded that here was a commissioner who was not a commissioner of the world; and when these men have been true to that standard they have been incomparable forces in the world.

The Protestant minister has too much forgotten the ideals of this separate priesthood. What is it that the minister should try to do? It seems to me that the minister should try to remind his fellow-men in everything that he does and in everything that he says, that eternity is not future, but present; that there is in every transaction of life a line that connects it with

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eternity, and that our lives are but the visible aspect of the experiences of our spirits upon the earth; that we are living here as spirits; that our whole conduct is to be influenced by things that are invisible, of which we must be constantly reminded lest our eyes should be gluttonously filled with the things that are visible; that we should be reminded that there lurks everywhere, not ungraciously and with forbidding mien, but graciously and with salvation on its countenance, the image and the memory of Christ, going a little journey through the earth to remind men of the fatherhood of God, of the

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brotherhood of men, of the journey that all spirits are taking to the land that is unseen and to which they are all to come.

It is very interesting to note how miscellaneous the Church of our day has become in its objects and endeavors. It is interesting to note how central it regards its kitchen in the basement, the bowling alley attached to the church, the billiard table where youngsters may amuse themselves, the gymnasium—the things that naturally associate themselves with what we call the institutional work of the Church. Did you ever ask yourself what an institution is? An

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institution is merely a way of doing some particular thing. Now, I am not now making any objection to entertainments, fairs, and amusements, but I do want to call your attention to the fact that the persons whom we lead to do these things are not often reminded of why it is that we ask them to do them there, at the church. I have been in some churches where, when these things were going on, the minute the minister came into the room, you somehow got the impression that you had been reminded of something. The walls of the room were no longer as solid as they were; you saw bigger

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spaces; the mind seemed to go back to dreams that had seemed vague before you at your mother's knee, and that gentle figure there seemed to say: "It is delightful that we should so disport ourselves, but we are spirits. We know each other only as we know each other spiritually, and only as these things bind us together in an eternal brotherhood is it worth while to be here." I have been at other such gatherings when the entrance of the minister did not suggest anything of the kind—when only another human being had come in to the room—a human being who had no more suggestion of the

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eternal about him than the youngest person present, a man who did not carry in his mien and attitude and speech any message whatever, whose personality was not radiant with anything.

Now, it does not take a great man to radiate a pure spirit, because the most modest gifts can be associated with very deep and real religious experiences, and the spirit may speak when the tongue is tied. I have myself witnessed the history of a pastor whose preaching was impossible but whose life, divine; and in twenty years there was built up a power out of that church, out of what I might call that speech-

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less church, which did not radiate from the most eloquent pulpit in the other churches of the place; where eloquence seemed empty alongside of radiant godliness; where the spirit seemed to have a thousand tongues and the mind only one; where the doctrine was more expounded by the daily life of the one pastor than by all the expositions of the others. If you can combine the two, if your life can display the secret and otherwise not readily understood principles of the Gospel and your sermons expound the life exemplified, then you have something irresistible for the regeneration and revo-

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lution of a community; but as compared with each other, the reminder of the life is worth a thousand times the suggestion of the pulpit.

Is not that the supreme lesson of the life of Christ? I have sometimes thought that we would be unspeakably enriched if we had known some of the incidents of the days that Christ lived on the earth which were quite distinct and separate from His teaching—the ordinary, now unregarded incidents of His day. For I am sure that there we should have had an example infinitely fruitful for our own guidance, and should have been con-

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scious that in everything that He said, every little thing that He did, there was a divine suggestion, a suggestion of divinity which was not a rebuke to humanity, but which heartened and revealed all that was best of itself, seemed like a sweet air out of some unattained country, like a light coming from some source that other men could not uncover; and that it must have been infinitely gracious to have Him lodge in the house. There must have seemed an atmosphere lingering there which made it impossible to forget that time was part of eternity.

Now the world is not going to

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be saved except the minister model himself on Christ. The world is not going to be evangelized unless the minister distinguish himself from the community. The Church is not going to recover its authority among men until its ministers display their credentials in their lives, by showing that the thought that is in them is always the thought that makes for salvation; that they will not teach the things that are impure; that they will not play with the things that are dangerous; that they are not reformers, but ministers of Christ. Did you ever notice that Christ was not a reformer? Not that He would

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have frowned upon a reformer, but He was not a reformer. He was not organizing men to do what is necessary to be done in order to reconstruct and better human life. He was supplying the whole motive force of that and everything else. It is just as much of a reform to go into a household where there is not the sweetness of Christian feeling and introduce it there by contagion, as it is to sit on a platform at a public meeting intended to set forward some missionary enterprise.

I remember—for I have had the unspeakable joy of having been born and bred in a minister's family

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—I remember one occasion which made a very profound impression upon me when I was a lad, in a company of gentlemen where my father was present, and where I happened to be, unobserved. One of the gentlemen in a moment of excitement uttered an oath, and then, his eye resting upon my father, he said with evident sincerity: “ Dr. Wilson, I beg your pardon; I did not notice that you were present.” “ Oh,” said my father, “ you mistake, sir; it is not to me you owe the apology.” I doubt if any other one remark ever entered quite so straight to the quick in me as that did, the consciousness that my

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father, taken by surprise, was at once so conscious that he was not the person offended, that he should so naturally call the attention of the man who had uttered the oath to what was the simple fact, that the offense was not to him but to his Master. It was exactly as if a disrespectful word had been spoken of the President of the United States in the presence of an ambassador of the United States; the apology would be due not to him but to his government. And if ministers could always so contrive it that in their presence the presence of God was manifest, the whole problem of the ministry would be

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solved and evangelization would be irresistible.

There is only one way by which fire is spread and that is by contact. The thing to be ignited must touch the fire, and unless the fire burns in you, nobody will be lighted by contact with you. No amount of studious knowledge of the subject-matter or of the methods of your profession will do you the least degree of service unless it is on fire, and has communicated its fire to your very heart and substance.

Let every man, therefore, who goes into the ministry set himself apart; let every man who goes into the ministry go into it with a

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determination that nobody shall fail to know that he is a minister of the Gospel. It can be graciously done, without austerity, without rebuke, without offensiveness; it can be done by the simple method merely of being conscious yourself that you are minister of God. For what a man is conscious of believing, he communicates to those who consort with him; what a man is known to stand for, he transmits to those who are in his presence though he speak never a word. And this consciousness of his will be the consciousness of every company he moves in, a sweet consciousness that will make his pres-

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ence very gracious and everything he does acceptable to those with whom he consorts—not shutting him off from the ordinary relationships of life, but irradiating those relationships, making them the means of spreading the consciousness he has of what he is.

When I hear some of the things which young men say to me by way of putting the arguments to themselves for going into the ministry, I think that they are talking of another profession. Their motive is to do something, when it should be to be something. You do not have to *be* anything in particular to be a lawyer. I have been

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a lawyer and I know. You do not have to *be* anything in particular, except a kind-hearted man, perhaps, to be a physician; you do not have to *be* anything, nor to undergo any strong spiritual change in order to be a merchant. The only profession which consists in *being* something is the ministry of our Lord and Saviour—and it does not consist of anything else. It is manifested in other things, but it does not consist of anything else. And that conception of the minister which rubs all the marks of it off and mixes him in the crowd so that you cannot pick him out, is a process of eliminating the ministry itself.

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Now, it is all very easy to say these things; it is impossible to do these things except by the influence and power of the Holy Spirit. If I could do the various things the right method of doing which I understand, I should be a most useful person. I know that we all should in some measure be ministers of Christ, and a man does not like to say the things that I have said and remember how little he has used his own profession to express that ministry. But, because we are imperfect, is it not the more necessary to know what the ideal is, to see it clearly, to see it steadily enough not to lose sight

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of it? If you lost the vision where would you go? If you did not know what you would be at, how would you ever find the way again? If you did not know what it was that you were embarking in, how could you make sure that you had found the right course of life? And the beauty of the Gospel is that it is a Gospel which leaves us, not the barren hope that in our own strength we can be useful, but the splendid, fruitful hope that there is One who if we but rely upon Him can inform us with these things and make our spirits to be the true spirits of God.

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